

## Steve Harrington Saves The World by EvieSmallwood

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Sometimes it takes a monster, sometimes it takes a fight; with Steve, it took two people and a broken home for him to realise that nothing is really as it seems.

## Steve Harrington Saves The World

*Us and them,*

*After all we're only ordinary men*

In his young life, Steve Harrington's future was changed in the smallest of ways. It happened like this: hope (*I'm gonna be just like you*), dissatisfaction (*you're gonna be just like your old man some day*), youth (*you can do better than that you son of a bitch*), realisation (*go home*), love (*how many is a crowd, really*), heartbreak (*It's over*), and acceptance (*I'm exactly fucking like him*).

When he was young, his father would look down at him and frown, like he was confused about what species Steve was, and for so long, it mattered. It mattered because all Steve wanted to do was please him, to get his father to understand him. It was everything. Until it wasn't.

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*March, 1973—They're Like The Wind*

Steve had been looking forward to Take Your Kid To Work Day for three weeks—ever since his father had sat him down at the kitchen table and calmly told him that Steve would be tagging along when the time came; all of his associates were bringing their children (had they any), and despite Steve's 'rowdiness', it would look odd if he wasn't present.

Along with that talk came a warning that he wasn't to run in the office, or speak unless spoken to, use his manners, and keep his hands at his sides.

"That's terrible," Steve had said. "You do that *all day*!?"

A rare smile had split his father's features, then, but it wasn't quite fond; almost bordering on the edges of sympathy, like he pitied Steve's ignorance—it was a look that the young boy didn't quite know how to articulate into thought, but somehow felt; deep in his stomach like a writhing snake, or a growing tumour which slowly ate away at him, gnawing on the edges of his confidence, of his trust in

his father.

“I do,” his father had replied. “And so will you.”

There was another thing, then; the open hanging tone which swung back and forth between them, sickly sweet to his father and venomous to Steve. He wanted to bat them away, those words, because dipped in that tone they were poisonous.

But he had said, “Okay,” and that had been the end of that.

So, come a Sunday morning in March, Steve’s mother crept in and leaned over him. She shook him awake, out of dreams he didn’t quite understand. They were always the same when he was stressed; colours—bright and out of focus. Then there were summer skies and the distinct feeling of someone playing with his hair, like his mom did when he was sick. It was nice. He felt safe, and older.

“Stevie,” she whispered. “Time to get up, honey.”

He cracked an eye, squinting at her through the darkness. “Five more minutes?”

“Come on, baby, daddy’ll be waiting. And I made you pancakes with whipped cream...”

It took less than a second for him to shoot out of bed, nearly colliding with her. Steve ran down the stairs and into the kitchen, settling at the counter. As he waited for his mother to come down, he ate, and took in the morning. He’d never been up so early in his life. It was quiet in a way he hadn’t realised the world could be; like colours somehow made it all louder. The grey sky and the blue sheen hovering over everything made it seem like all of the life was still sleeping.

His parents came down the stairs together, talking in hushed tones. His dad was already dressed, hair slicked back and face cleanly shaven. As he passed Steve, he ruffled his hair. “Morning, kid. Get ready quick.”

Steve nodded, wiping the cream from his cheeks. His father poured himself a cup of coffee, and then one for his wife, who politely

accepted it and proceeded to add two sugars and a splash of cream. Steve remembered last year, when she'd put so much of the stuff in there that the coffee turned almost white. Now she was trying to 'keep lean'—which meant she ate about one meal a day, and that was usually just a pile of lettuce.

"Hurry up, sweetheart."

Steve managed to eat the rest in a rush. He pushed away from the counter. "I laid your clothes out on your bed!" called his mother.

His clothes, it turned out, were slacks, a freshly pressed white shirt like the one his dad always wore, and a jacket. He'd worn formal wear before; even suits—they were always uncomfortable, and you had to eat everything slow so as not to stain. His mom was always sad at him when he ruined clothes. She got a line between her brows as she frowned down at it, and at him. *Now I have to buy you a new shirt*, she would complain, like there weren't twenty others just like it in his closet.

That was one of the things about being wealthy Steve had recognised even then; his mother (with the bi-weekly maid, nanny, and job) was so desperate to take care of him that she made up things she had to do, and those things were always easy.

Steve dressed quickly, wet his hair and combed it back, brushed his teeth, and met his father by the door. The moment they slipped outside, the genial partiality his father always possessed seemed to slip away, replaced with a mask of contemplative grimness. Only, Steve realised, it wasn't a mask.

His father was a stone man, who wore face paint when he needed to pretend to care. Maybe all of the caring in him was gone.

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The elevator chimed pleasantly, and the doors rolled open. The scene before them was something... almost like magic. Steve's eyes widened as he took in the floor his father worked on; the secretaries in brightly coloured dresses, the typing, the paper which seemed to fly from one desk to another (only it wasn't; the people were just

moving so fast they didn't really exist. Like ghosts).

A warm hand pressed between Steve's shoulder blades. "Come on."

His father led him through the rows of desks. The women and men behind them smiled blankly, though their eyes held a certain hungry hope. Steve would come to realise that being the boss's kid meant you were loved for now, but when you got a little older, the resentment would begin to seep into those smiles; being the son of the Big Man was being a threat to all of those who wanted to be Big Men.

When you were small, though, it didn't matter so much.

"Morning, Mr. Harrington," said a voice.

Steve looked to the left and spotted a tall, skinny woman waiting for them. Steve's dad smiled and handed off his coat and hat. "Morning."

Patty, her placard read. She beamed down at Steve. "And this is your son, then?"

"Steve, this is Patty. She'll be tending to you today—and don't give her any trouble."

Patty held out her hand, which Steve shook. "Hi," he said. *You're pretty*. And she was; her hair was blonde and shining, so long it reached her waist. She was wearing a green petticoat dress—the same kind his mother wore, only somehow it looked better on Patty. "I won't give you any trouble, I promise."

Patty gave a grateful laugh that fell as soon as they slipped through the door into Mr. Harrington's office. It was large, and one whole wall was simply glass. Steve could see the building across from them. It seemed much closer this way.

"Your meeting with Mr. Hanson has been delayed to three," said Patty. She hung up the coat and waited while Steve's father sorted through the mail on his desk.

"Any calls?"

“None. Sir.”

He glanced up. “Miss me?”

Patty smiled. *Mom never smiles like that. Dad never smiles like that.* “Terribly.”

Steve’s father lit a cigarette as Patty stepped out. Steve watched him take a long drag, facing the window and staring out at the skyline. “You know, all of this... it doesn’t matter. This city. These buildings. They’ll all be changed someday. The only constant thing, Stephen, is the existence of man—now that we exist, anyway. See it like this: even if one day we’re wiped out, our impressions will remain, because there’s nothing after to change that.”

Steve stared. He felt something swell up in his chest; maybe pride, at being told this, like it was some sort of secret. He stood up a little straighter.

“I have to make rounds,” his father snubbed his cigarette. “Stay here, will you?”

Steve nodded. His father passed him, and as he did so, Steve thought that he was slowly becoming one of those ghosts out there, too.

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Later, after they got home, Steve’s father carried him into his room. His face was blank as he tucked his son into bed and looked down at him. There had never been any bedtime stories, and the only real story they would ever have was how the nothing between them grew into something, and how that something destroyed the world.

Steve’s world, anyway.

“Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

Steve looked at the wedding ring on his father’s left hand, which still held youth, and thought of Patty—of how she leaned toward him whenever she spoke to him, and how her eyes were always full of

light, and how she had done everything that he had asked.

“I’m gonna be just like you, someday.”

And just like that, a promise was a promise. But it wasn’t enough. It never would be.

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### *July 4th, 1976—Crack and Crash and Burn*

His mother had thrown a barbecue on the Fourth of July, which normally Steve wouldn’t mind—but he’d had plans to lounge by the pool, trade cards with Tommy, and then come home to fireworks and a film or something.

Instead, the house was going to be full of executives, and he and Tommy were both being forced to attend.

“I can’t believe we’re actually gonna have to suffer like this on the *Fourth of July*,” Tommy moaned, facedown on Steve’s bed. “Isn’t this day supposed to be about freedom?”

Steve snorted. “All you wanted to do was stare at Angie Collins,” he said, sorting through the piles of dirty clothes on his floor.

“She’s cute.”

“She’s also, like, thirty.” He found a suitable pair of pants, sniffed them, and shrugged. He set them aside for later.

Tommy sighed. “I hate this,” he said. “I hate that my dad took that job.”

“At least you have money, now.”

“It’s not always about money, man.”

“This is America,” Steve struggled into a plaid shirt. “Of course it is.”

Tommy sat up. He squinted at Steve with something like foreboding on his face. “You’re gonna be just like your old man one day, you

know that?"

Steve straightened—but somehow, from Tommy's mouth, it didn't sound like much of a compliment. He pursed his lips and sighed through his nose. "Come on," he said, "we can get sparklers at the corner store or something."

Tommy hopped off the bed. Steve grabbed his baseball cap and led him downstairs. Melanie, the newest maid, was pressing orange slices into the Jell-o mold. "Be back by three," she told them, "and don't get dirty."

"A-yah," said Steve. Tommy shut the door behind them. The sidewalk was so hot Steve could feel it through his PF flyers. It bore down on their necks as they mounted their bikes. *It's one of those days*, Steve thought, *where it's so hot all of the moments get seared into memory.*

Tommy kept ahead of him a little for most of the ride, but Steve managed to beat him to the store. They slipped inside, which was blissfully air conditioned.

"Mike, no!"

Steve whirled, just as a little boy raced past him. He had dark hair, and he was giggling, holding up a small toy dinosaur.

A girl their age was chasing after him. The first thing Steve noticed was her hair; it was brown, long, wavy, and most definitely soft. He could smell it from here. Lemons and oranges and something else.

"I don't have enough money for that," she said to the boy, who was probably her brother. "Put it back, please?"

The kid—Mike—pouted. He hugged it to his chest. "Please? It's the Fourth of July."

The girl folded her arms over her chest. "I know what day it is."

"I can pay for it."

His own voice surprised him. The girl turned, brow furrowed. "No, it's okay. He really doesn't need it."



"It's okay." Steve dug a wad of cash out of his back pocket. Her eyes widened.

"You carry *that much* on you?"

"Just today," he grinned and handed her five. "Tommy and I are spending all our savings on firecrackers."

She slowly accepted the money, eyes never leaving his face. "Thanks. Really."

When she smiled, the whole world lit up, and suddenly Steve didn't need mornings or marshmallow cereal or baseball or all of the other things that made him happy. He just needed that; her smile. Anything else was insignificant in comparison.

He felt his heart skip a beat. "No problem."

She walked over to the counter, gently guiding her brother that way. "I'm gonna name him Rory!" Mike exclaimed, making it bound across the counter.

Steve watched him, feeling both light and dark. He recalled being six or so, and holding up his own stuffed polar bear to his father, who had examined it with distaste. *What's the point of it?*

He shrugged. *I hope your dad likes your dinosaur, Mike.*

Tommy yanked him over to the firecrackers. "Stevie's got a *cruuuush*," he teased, grinning like an idiot.

Steve rolled his eyes. "It's called being nice."

He heard the bell ding behind them and felt his heart break a little. Tommy started grabbing for the firecrackers, eyes full of glee. Steve examined them more slowly, checking the prices like his father always did when they shopped, even though they had enough money to last them a long, long time without worrying—at least, that was what his mom said when he asked if they were wealthy.

They dropped the firecrackers onto the counter. The clerk raised his eyebrows, obviously hesitant, before Steve handed over the horribly

generous fifty.

After they were rung up, Steve led Tommy outside. The girl wasn't there, like he'd secretly hoped.

"Who's trashcan do we blow up first, Harrington?"

Steve glanced at Tommy, a little startled. *Harrington*. Something about it felt so wrong, even though it shouldn't have. It should have felt perfect, suitable—he should have been proud of his last name, right?

Steve looked out at the street, at the little houses and the smoke rising from backyards, and the kids walking their dogs (*I always wanted a dog*), and dropped his armful of firecrackers.

"Hey! What the hell, Steve?"

"Forget it, Tommy." His throat was tight, but he didn't know why. His eyes were burning and blurry. *This is wrong. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be this person.*

Tommy grabbed his arm. "You're just gonna waste your money?"

"It's not my money," he mounted his bike, eyes on the ground, "it's his."

Tommy shook his head. "You've got heat stroke or something, man."

He looked completely disgusted. Steve set his jaw, and swallowed the words in this throat. They were harsh, and loud, and meaningful, but they wouldn't be of any use just yet. Instead, he jerked his head toward the bag he'd dropped. "Take them," he ordered. "I know you want to."

"And what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna..." he bit his lip. *I'm gonna save the world someday. I don't know how yet, but I will. I'm gonna make it better.* "I-I'm going home."

Steve pedalled his bike out of the lot and onto the road. He heard Tommy calling after him, as he would many times, calling him crazy.

Steve didn't care. Everything he had ever known was falling apart, and why? Because of some kids and their dog? A boy and his dinosaur? Why did they matter so damn much?!

He kept going until he was on the poorer side of Hawkins—a side he so rarely saw. The houses were like shacks; roof tiles missing, lawns overgrown and cluttered with crap; broken toys, rusty cars, tires...

Steve stopped in front of one of them, eyes on the bike against the porch and the still, crystal wind chimes. There were clothes hanging on the line; clothes his size, and smaller ones, too. And there were beer cans on the porch rail.

He stared for a long time, wondering what it would be like to live there, and have nothing while everyone else had everything. He stared until a man in a tank top stumbled out of the shed by the house. He was sighing smoke from the cigarette between his lips, and he squinted up at Steve. "What?"

Steve swallowed. *This isn't a good man.* He could feel that much; the bad seemed to radiate off of him in waves. Steve knew who the guy was, too: Lonnie Byers. The town screw up. "Nothing. Sorry."

"Beat it, you little punk." Lonnie tossed his cigarette into the grass. It didn't catch, somehow, but Steve hated that he had done it. The screen door slammed shut behind him, and Steve felt an odd sort of anger at the sound. *At least I'm better than this.*

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*November, 1979—A Punch To The Stomach Does Wonders*

Baseball was everything.

As dirt came up to meet him he remembered his father's words the previous winter. They had been at the table, talking. Steve had said he was thinking of trying out for a sport next season, which really had just been a fleeting thought. He'd regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. His father's eyes had taken a hard glint, and he leaned across the table toward Steve. *Go for baseball. It's everything. It unites men.*

Steve's body slammed against the ground. He felt something pop, and hissed in pain. *Yeah, okay, dad. Thanks.*

"Shit..."

"Harrington!" The coach hurried over, kneeling beside Steve. "What happened?!"

"I tripped," Steve struggled to sit up, wincing. His right arm was throbbing. "I think I might have broken something..."

Coach Lowery waved it off. "Nonsense. It's a sprain at most. If you'd broken something, you'd be screaming right now."

Steve frowned. "You're not gonna take me out of the game, are you?"

The game—his first real game—was tomorrow. Coach Lowery's lips disappeared into a thin white line. He helped Steve to his feet. "I might have to, son. Let's go bandage this, alright?"

Steve's teammates were watching them. "Back to work!" Lowery barked.

They scrambled. Tommy, who was pitching, dropped his ball. "Jeez! Sorry, coach!"

Lowery led him to the sandlot. They sat on the rickety old bench while the coach sorted through the first aid kit he'd grabbed. "Please don't take me out of the game," he begged. "I can play, really. I promise."

Lowery looked doubtful. "We'll see how it is tomorrow."

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It was worse the next day—not visibly so, though there was bruising. Steve glared at it resentfully as he rolled down his shirt sleeve. Even being gentle hurt.

The bleachers were nearly full as Steve and his parents arrived. They went to go sit with the others, while Steve met Tommy in the lot. He looked agitated. "Tigers against the Lions, man. The coach is gonna

let you try,” he said. “Why did you miss practice?”

“I had to help my mom out with something,” he lied. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be, Harrington. Are you?”

“Sure. Totally.” The coach called them out, and the crowd clapped. Steve liked the sound, and the feeling of being watched in such a good way. He tapped the ground with the bat and waited for the opposing team’s pitcher—Rodney—to throw the ball, heart slamming against his chest. *What if I screw up?*

He did.

Steve swung as hard as he could, determined to grit his teeth through the pain, but he only ended up dropping the bat and crying out. It flew across the dirt, toward the bushes.

The ref blew his whistle and Lowery called for a time out.

“Come on!” The Lions’ coach threw his arms up, agitated. “It’s only the first throw!”

“He’s *hurt*, goddamnit. Harrington, to the sidelines! Now!”

Steve, clutching his arm and trying to hide his tears, walked off the field. Lowery followed him. “This was a bad idea,” he said. “I shouldn’t have let you in. My fault, kid.”

“But, coach—”

“Listen, Harrington, and listen close,” Lowery leaned down, “not every game matters. Not even your first. The only ones that matter are the ones you win. And kid, you’re not winning this one with that arm. Now go home—or better yet, go see a doctor.” He clapped Steve on the good shoulder. “Ah, there’s your Pop. Take a breather, will you, Harrington? You’re the best on the team. I don’t like to see this stuff from real talent.”

He nodded to Steve’s father, who barely gave any recognition at all. Lowery walked back to the game in a hurry.

“What the hell was that?”

Steve stared at his shoes, shaking.

“Stephen.”

His father grabbed him. Steve yelped, which only made everything worse. As soon as his father saw the tears in his eyes, he locked his jaw and struck Steve across the face. “What are you, a dog?!”

Steve sucked in a sharp breath. He stared into those icy blue eyes, and felt something chill within him. Fear turned into anger so easily it was like a switch. “No.”

Another slap, this time on the other cheek. “You looked like some fucking queer out there, crying. You’re a stain on my reputation, boy.”

Steve’s body was an ocean in the middle of a storm, churning, blood pounding. He wanted nothing more, had no greater desire, than to hit his father back. He wanted to throw him into the dirt and pummel him until he was... until he was dead.

But then the pressure in his shoulders was relieved. His father had stepped back. He rubbed his reddened hand. “I apologise for striking you.”

A silence settled between them. Steve glared as his father waited expectantly. “What do you want *me* to say? I’m sorry for being a fuck up?!”

The next thing he knew, he was being dragged by his sprained arm around the side of the building. Black spots danced before his eyes. His dad tossed him into the grass like garbage. “You have no right to speak to me that way, and you know that.”

“Yeah, sorry. I forgot you’re not a human being when you’re a minor.”

A punch to the stomach. Steve gasped. *I have to stop.* “Oh, come on. I know you can do better than that, you son of a bitch.”

Right in the eye—so hard Steve’s head was thrown back. “You’re gonna shut your mouth and learn your place—”

“Stop it.”

Steve looked up. The sight of his mother was like an angel descending upon Earth. Her face was as white as a sheet, and her lips were pressed together. She stomped over the grass in her high heels. “Get up, baby.”

Steve rolled onto his back, panting. The world spun, and his father’s leer seemed infinite. “I don’t think I can.”

“See? This is the foolishness I’m talking about. He needs to man up. A good beating is the way all the best men learned—”

“And you’re *so great*,” she glared at her husband, eyes alight with a fire Steve had never seen. “Come on, Steve. We’re going home.”

“I haven’t finished this lesson—”

His mother stopped walking. “Oh no, you’re not coming.”

His father jerked away from her like he’d been slapped. “*Excuse me?*”

“You heard me. You can sleep in your fucking office, or in the arms of that secretary—what’s her name? Annie? Only little girls have names like that.”

She shook her head in disgust, but the worst part of it was that his father didn’t argue. He merely stood there, towering over the both of them, both intimidating and meek at once. His fists were curled and bloody.

His mother turned to him. “Get. Up.”

Steve struggled to his feet, groaning, and hobbled past his father. His stomach ached, but as they walked away, he felt more and more like he could fly. He started laughing. His mother laughed, too, but there was no joy in either of them.

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*August, 1982—Midnight Shift*

“You need a job.”

Steve stopped chewing. He raised his eyes from his cereal bowl and took in his dad, who was suited and freshly shaven. A long time ago, that look had been appealing to Steve; he had wanted to be just as sharp, just as professional.

Nowadays, he cared a little more about body when it came to hair, and his dad barely had any left.

Well, that was a little dramatic, but it *was* receding.

“You gonna hire me?”

His father sighed. “You’re not equipped for such work,” he said.

Steve dropped his spoon and leaned back in his seat. “Yeah? What was your first job? Running the country?”

“Just apply, Stephen.” With that, his old man picked up his briefcase and left the house. Steve finished his breakfast in silence, stirring his frosted flakes in the milk, a bad taste in the back of his mouth.

He didn’t really need a job, his dad was just sick of seeing him around the house, and they both knew that. Maybe that was the way he wanted things; for all three of them to barely talk, or even exist in the same place.

The defiant streak within him (which had rapidly developed over the last few years) screamed not to do it, but the coward screamed back and louder: *he’ll kill you! You have to!*

A week later, he scored a job at a burger joint. From there, things got ugly.

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Steve wiped the counter with an old rag, humming along to the radio under his breath. He wasn’t worried about being heard, for everyone had clocked out except Jeremy—who was even more new than Steve,



having been hired that morning. *I guess they want the place to be burned down.*

The door opened. Steve found himself meeting eyes he'd tried to catch so many times before; they were blue, and pretty, and almost like home.

"Nancy Wheeler." He knew her name now, and it felt nice to say.

Nancy smiled tentatively. She was quiet. He remembered that she had been loud in that shop all those years ago. "Hi. Um, can I get four burgers and... God, hold on." She dug around in her bag and produced a small slip of paper. "Yeah, okay. Four burgers, two large fries, and some onion rings."

Steve grinned. He decided he liked pretty much everything she said, and the way she said it. "Totally."

He punched the order in and took her twenty. "Keep the change," she said significantly. Steve thought of a little boy playing with a dinosaur and nodded.

He called the order back to Jeremy, who'd done grill at his old job. "So, Nancy Wheeler—"

The door opened again, and all of his words died in his throat.

Some tall redhead stumbled in, dragging a man by his tie. Steve's father. They were drunk and she was giggling, and she was beautiful, and she was too young.

"Is something wrong?"

Steve swallowed, managing to focus on Nancy again, just as his father focused on him.

"Stephen," he said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"You told me to get a job," Steve replied coldly. *I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.* "I got one."

"Here, of all places?" He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket

pocket and lit up swiftly. “What have I told you about the reputation of this family?”

Steve scowled. “We’re in a public place. *Dad.*”

The redhead winced. She sagged against the wall, playing with the hem of her skirt.

Nancy hesitated. “Maybe I should just go.”

“But your food, your family—”

He was desperate for her to stay, and she was desperate to go. “It’s fine,” she smiled (*god I love that smile*). “I’ll just... tell them the place was closed.”

She stuffed her paper slip back in her bag and hurried out. Steve watched her go. His father did, too, and Steve didn’t like that at all.

“Go home,” he said, giving up.

His father shook his head. “Get something better.”

Steve didn’t know if he meant the job, Nancy, or both—but either way he didn’t care. He couldn’t care anymore.

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*December, 1983—Wanted: A Family*

“Did you give it to him?”

She curled into him and nodded. Steve smiled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. He played with her hair, which smelt of peppermint for the holiday season. Christmas music played softly, and Ted snored in his sleep, passed out in the Lay-Z-Boy. There was something so picturesque about it, but as soon as that door had shut, a cold feeling had settled over Steve.

“Did he open it?”

"Hmm.... no, he didn't," Nancy played with his sweater, which she'd bought for him as a gift. Steve had never been given a gift like that; his parents always gave him serious things—*necessities*. "I think he'll probably wait until he gets home, to open it alone, you know. He's like that."

Steve didn't really know what Jonathan Byers was like, but after last month, he was pretty sure he didn't know what anything was like at all.

Something nagged at him, still. "I... I didn't get him that camera just because I feel bad," he said softly.

Nancy looked up. "Why did you get it?"

"Because—" *because he grabbed my hand and that almost killed me more than the son of a bitch chasing after us*. "I don't know why. Just a feeling."

Nancy shifted into a sitting position. She wiped her face, which was flushed from the warmth of the Wheeler house. Slowly she laced their fingers together, and they sat listening to the kids play downstairs.

"I know what you mean," Nancy said, after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I think so." She sighed. "I-it feels weird to be away from him, you know? After we almost died together..."

Steve rested his neck against the couch, sinking into the cushions. "I want to be his friend."

Nancy laughed, which shocked him. "What? What's funny?"

"Nothing, just—you were kicking each other's asses behind a movie theatre last month, and now you want to be friends."

"A lot happened after that," he defended.

"No, I know," she bit her lip, "it's just so *ridiculous*. All of it. Everything that happened, it's like it wasn't even real."

“But it *was*.”

Nancy shook her head and kissed him. It was slow, and soft, and they melted into one another like they'd been fused together. Her lips were warm. Steve drew back, glancing at Ted's sleeping form. “This is weird.”

“Yeah, definitely a little weird.” She stood, pulling him up with her. “Let's go bother Mike, that's always fun.”

Steve laughed.

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Later that night, he lay in bed, staring at his ceiling. There was so much that had been left unsaid or solved between the three of them; so much that he was holding on to—all of the regret about before, and hope for something better. The absence of her was different than it was with him. With Nancy, it was like the clouds were obscuring the sky on a day that was supposed to be sunny; all you felt was disappointed. With Jonathan... it was having to stay inside while it rained. The boredom was unreal, but he supposed it was because with Jonathan (the only *withs* he knew), lights flashed, and your knuckles bled, and your life changed.

Without Jonathan, the power was out.

And that was how he found himself in his car at midnight, driving down the road he'd once biked. Somehow he knew every turn by heart.

Steve parked away from the turn in and ran across the lawn. He rounded the house and came upon the window he knew wasn't Will's. Steve stepped onto a cinder block and knocked.

The figure in bed jolted. Steve knocked again, a little lighter. Jonathan Byers rolled out of bed and stumbled through the dark. He pushed up the old window and squinted at Steve, hair tousled and eyes bleary. “What are you doing here?”

“I want to talk,” Steve cleared his throat. “Can I come in?”

Jonathan was silent for a moment, seemingly weighing his options. Finally he stepped aside to let Steve climb through, which he did. “Ninja,” he muttered, cheeks flushed. He was grateful Jonathan couldn’t see.

The other boy closed the window. Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “A light?”

“Right.”

He flicked on the lamp by his bed. It was still dim, but it was something. “I need to apologise,” he said. “I um... I really was an ass to you. I crossed a line with the things I said—but I want you to know I didn’t mean them. I don’t think those things. About your family... and about you.”

Jonathan looked small. That was the only way to describe him; he seemed to shrink into himself, studying Steve with great intrigue. “I’m not perfect,” he said, after a moment (and something buried within Steve, which would wake after a few months, screamed in protest). “I messed up, too. And I-I’m sorry.”

Steve nodded. He hovered on the edges of speaking, and then settled back against the wall. Jonathan shifted. “Why do you care so much?”

Steve didn’t even have to think. “You saved my life. You saved Nancy’s.”

“I saved you? Jesus, Steve—if you hadn’t...”

Their eyes met. Steve sighed. “So... how do you like your camera?”

Jonathan laughed, but it died so quick it was almost like it never existed. “How did you know about that?”

“I—Nancy and I, we bought it. Together. For you. Because we um... like having you. Around. Jesus, this is so bad... I wanna be your friend, okay?”

At that, Jonathan Byers grinned. Steve liked the way he looked, just then. He almost wished he could rewind the seconds just to see the happiness form again. “You sure I won’t be butting in on you guys?”

He shrugged. “How many is a crowd, really?”

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*June 2nd, 1984—Local Boy Asks For Hugs and Kisses From His Girlfriend*

A dinner plate shattered.

Steve ducked, eyes wide and breath slipping from his lungs. He whirled around and found his mother in the middle of the kitchen. Her hair was tangled. She was crying, and screaming at Steve’s father—who stood at the bottom of the stairwell, face grim.

Steve shut the door. “What the hell is going on?!”

“Your father is a piece of shit, that’s what!”

Steve brushed his jacket off. “Yeah? What else is new?”

His father stiffened. “You little *bastard*,” he spat.

Another plate flew. “Son of a bitch!” screamed his mother. Her cheeks were flushed red. Steve hurried to step between them.

“Mom, calm down.”

“Like *hell* I will—”

“*Please*, mom. Just *calm down*.” Her chest was heaving—Steve had never seen her so angry. He slowly approached her, hands up placatingly. “Just tell me what happened, okay?”

“He cheated,” she sobbed. “Your father was *unfaithful*.”

“Oh, come on,” her husband huffed. “You’ve spun these delusions so thin you’re snapping.”

“*Bullshit*.”

“You’re right, it’s bullshit,” Steve glared at his father. In that moment, he felt power. He felt larger than he ever had in his life, because suddenly the shackles which had bound him for so long were

breaking. “He’s probably screwed every secretary he’s had.”

“I know that,” his mother shoved past him, headed toward the decanter. “But this time, Stevie, it means a little more.” She poured herself a glass, threw it back, and went for another. “You see, he knocked one of them up.”

Steve felt his knees go weak. He grabbed onto the counter.

“That is *not true!*”

“She called me! The little bitch called *my* house, where *our son* lives, asking for your monthly child support check! But I suppose I’m reaching, right?! I must be fucking *delusional*.”

Steve looked between them. “Are you *serious*, right now?”

“Yes,” his mother was simply irate. Her eyes were alight with that fire which mean the destruction of all things.

“She’s lying.”

Steve and his mother glared. “*Shut up*,” they said together.

His mother slammed the glass down on the counter. It shattered. “Get out,” she hissed. “I want you to get the hell out of my house—right now.”

“I will not—”

“It’s over,” she said. “It’s really over. I want you gone.”

“I’ll call the damn police,” Steve threatened. *I’ll have Hopper on your ass lightning quick.*

His father, who had barely been one at all, stormed over to the door. “You’ll regret this when you’re living in the slums, you bitch.”

“*Hey!*”

“It’s okay, Steve,” she placed her hand on his arm. “Let him go.”

*Yeah. Gladly.*

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His back was pressed against the car door, and she was pressed against him. Steve had his arms wrapped around her waist. He was half asleep, drifting on the edges of a dream-like state.

“It doesn’t feel real,” he whispered.

Nancy hummed. “It wouldn’t for anyone, babe.”

“But I mean... I have a sibling.”

Nancy shifted so that she was facing him. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. He’s gone. It’s just that—that I’ve been alone my whole life. Who knows how old this kid is? What if they *look* like me?”

She nodded, pushing his hair from his eyes and lightly kissed his nose. “It’s hard. I know. I’m here though, I promise.”

Steve closed his eyes again, heart rate settling. “And Jon,” he said.

Nancy huffed a laugh. “And Jon.”

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*June 3rd, 1984—Local Boy Seeks Comfort From His Boyfriend*

He stood on the edges of the water, hands full of stones and heart empty. “I used to think my dad was everything. The epitome of success, respect... I mean, there was nothing he wanted that he couldn’t get.” Steve flicked another rock onto the lake, skipping one, two, three, before sinking.

He turned the next rock over in his hands, frowning. “He had the right looks, the right job, had not one, but two beautiful women hanging off of his arms, ready to drop everything for him.”

Steve looked over at Jonathan at that, a wry smirk on his face. “I mean, that was the dream, right?”

Jonathan didn’t respond, so Steve threw the next rock. It only skipped once. “I wanted to be just like him. So when he didn’t like



the toys I played with, I threw them away. When he frowned at clothes I picked out, I put them back. When he told me that boys didn't cry, I didn't."

Steve dropped the rock he was holding at turned towards Jonathan. "It's sort of ironic, really. Because now that I know what a complete and utter piece of shit he is... I realise I'm exactly fucking like him. Just like I always wanted, right?"

There was bitterness dripping from his words as he sat down on the boulder beside Jonathan, who squinted at the rising sun. "You're not, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said: you're not." Jonathan shrugged. "You're different."

"In what way?"

"Every way." Jon rose, tossing a stone from hand to hand. "My dad was a piece of shit, and for a while... for a while I thought I was gonna end up just like him. But then I met you, and I realised—not everything is the way you think it will be. I mean, I've been told that all my life; my mom used to say it all the time—but I never believed it, because he was shit and I was shit."

"You are *not*—"

"That's my point, you idiot," Jonathan smiled a little. "It's self-deprecating, I guess. We think we'll become them, but we're nothing like them."

"How do you know that?"

"Because if it's me and you against the rest of the world, we win."

Steve rolled his eyes. "You're so pretentious, it's disgusting." He nestled his head into the crook of Jon's neck and closed his eyes. The knot in his chest was gone, replaced by warmth. Replaced by love.

Steve smiled. Maybe even permanent problems turned temporary,

after a while.

**Author's Note:**

Once again a slight AU, given that our lovely OT3 gets together before the events of season 2.

Steve's dad is a grade A asshole.

Feedback is appreciated! Thank you for reading!